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Snow White and the Trickster: *Race and Genre in Helen Oyeyemi's* Boy, Snow, Bird

Kimberly J. Lau

ABSTRACT

This article considers Helen Oyeyemi's novel, Boy, Snow, Bird, *as a critical integration of European fairy tale and African folktale. Reimagining "Snow White" as a story about race and history in midcentury America, the novel unsettles the fairy tale's color symbolism and its relation to "fairness," insisting instead on whiteness as racialized and determined by shifting lines of sight structured by histories of slavery, violence, segregation, blood, and passing. Structurally, the novel's use of African folktale forms exposes the racial assumptions underpinning the "Snow White" tradition while also contesting the cultural hegemony of the European fairy tale more generally. KEYWORDS:* Oyeyemi, Snow White, European fairy tale, African folktale, race

> To be enchanted is to be struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and the everyday.
>
> Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*

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Helen Oyeyemi's *Boy, Snow, Bird* is a retelling of *Snow White* enfolded in a novel of enchantments and African folk forms. Full of provocative wonders born as much of magic as of power and politics, Oyeyemi's fantastically real tale calls forth the haunting specters of historical and cultural violence that disturb the everyday and shake loose the extraordinary lurking in the familiar. Perhaps ironically, it is Oyeyemi's deconstruction of the fairy tale that sets its magic free and encourages enchantment's proliferation. Although all retellings and adaptations tend toward deconstruction, the deconstruction at work in *Boy, Snow, Bird* is of a more fundamental nature: instead of simply allowing her retelling to do the deconstructive work, Oyeyemi literally deconstructs the fairy tale into its constituent parts, its dominant tropes, without reworking them into a singular narrative. Gathered together in ways that resonate with the structures and conventions of African folktales and their storytelling performances, *Snow White*'s tropes open into nuanced and multilayered social, historical, and literary critiques and inspire the novel's most unsettling moments of enchantment.

Boy, Snow, Bird is structured in three parts and revolves around the imbricated lives of the eponymous female characters—Boy, Snow, and Bird—connected through marriage and birth. Spanning two decades, the novel's first and third parts are narrated by Boy; the second is narrated by her teen-aged daughter, Bird, and, through an epistolary exchange, by Snow, Boy's 20-something stepdaughter and Bird's stepsister. Part I opens in the 1940s with Boy's story of escape, around the age of 20, from her abusive father; fleeing the man she calls the Ratcatcher, she settles in Flax Hill, Massachusetts, where she meets and marries Arturo Whitman, a local widower and the father of Snow, a beautiful seven-year-old beloved by her extended families (the Whitmans and the Millers) and, indeed, the entire town. Initially, Boy and Snow share what Boy describes as a profoundly meaningful relationship, claiming "maybe it's the thief in me, but I think this girl is mine, and that when she and I are around each other, we're giving each other something we've never had, or taking back something we've lost" (109).

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Not surprisingly, things change when Bird is born. Bird's arrival is a disruptive force in Boy and Snow's relationship as well as in the extended Whitman family, the town, and the novel, because she is born with undeniably African American features and coloring. As such, she exposes what the extended Whitman and Miller families have been hiding, the passing for which Snow is so deeply cherished. Bird's birth also brings to the fore the story of Clara Whitman, Arturo's sister, who was sent away as a child to be raised by an aunt because she was too dark-skinned to pass; Clara even goes so far as to suggest that Boy send Bird to her to raise, but Boy chooses to send Snow away instead.

In the second part of the novel, racial consciousness and racial prejudice circulate through Bird's account of her everyday life, her relationship with Louis Chen (and his family's racialization in the context of the Korean and Vietnam wars), and her epistolary exchange with Snow, a relationship Boy has sought to deny for reasons that she herself cannot fully explain or understand.[1] In the final part of the novel, the entire family—not only Snow but also Clara and her African American husband, John—is reunited at Thanksgiving, and the dinner scene again calls attention to the complexities of racial formation, racial identity, and the ethics and violence of passing. Later, after Boy has resolved and righted her history and relationship with Snow, the three women and Boy's closest friend, Mia, head off to New York in an effort to disenchant the Ratcatcher, who—they have learned—is actually Boy's birth mother (a woman who chose to become a man when her mirror reflection appeared to her as such).[2]

THE FAIREST OF THEM ALL

Boy, Snow, Bird transforms the tradition of the *Snow White* tale into a marvelously real meditation on race, ethnicity, and gender in midcentury America. At the foundation of Oyeyemi's adaptation is an intricate play on the color symbolism so central to Snow White—both the girl and the tale—that first amplifies and then reimagines the ways they (the girl and the tale) implicitly condense and conflate whiteness, beauty, and value. Where the tale relies on the easy slippage between *fairest* as a signifier of

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both beauty and complexion, such that the fairest (*i.e.*, the most beautiful) in the land is, literally, the fairest (*i.e.*, the palest) of them all, *Boy, Snow, Bird* insists on whiteness as both racialized and constantly determined by shifting lines of sight. Even more, the novel's attention to stories of passing, racial prejudice, and emerging civil rights highlights an entirely overlooked dimension of *fairest* in *Snow White*: *fairest* as the most just.

Boy, Snow, Bird's constant inversions and slippages—between mothers and daughters in all their iterations (birth, step, in-law, foster, trans), between meanings of *fairest*, between mirrored image and reality—collaborate to unsettle the fairy tale's clearly demarcated roles. Snow White, the Evil Queen—the reader is never quite certain who fills which role. Early on, Boy could be Snow White—beautiful, pale, cold: she describes her youthful mirror reflection as "a girl with a white-blond pigtail hanging down over one shoulder; eyebrows and lashes the same color; still, near-black eyes; and one of those faces some people call 'harsh' and others call 'fine-boned,'" adding that her "complexion is unpredictable, goes from near bloodless to scalded and back again, all without [her] permission" (3-4). While this arrangement of Boy's red, white, and black features may not align perfectly with the red, white, and black so commonly associated with the European *Snow White* tradition, it nonetheless holds them together at the foundation of her beauty. Later, of course, Snow clearly fills the Snow White role, but so too does Bird as she pursues teen-aged versions of social justice and recounts the histories of civil rights heroes, the embodiment of *fairest*'s other meaning.

Boy is at times also positioned as the Evil Stepmother. For instance, well before deciding to exile Snow, Boy receives an intricately wrought bracelet—"a white-gold snake that curled its tail around [her] wrist and pressed its tongue against the veins in the crook of [her] elbow" (103-104)—in lieu of an engagement ring from Arturo, a jeweler by profession. When Mia sees the bracelet for the first time, she says, "I mean, could that scream 'wicked step mother' any louder?" (105). However, Boy's position as Evil Stepmother is complicated by Olivia Whitman's Evil

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Mother-in-Law role so evident in her near-refusal to acknowledge Bird and her desire that Bird be sent to Clara.

In the face of such racial prejudice and hatred, Boy's commitment to Bird and her decision to send Snow to Clara take on a different resonance and intervene in a long history of racist ideologies about white and black mothering. In challenging the culturally pervasive images of racialized maternal care, legal scholar Patricia Williams calls attention to the enchanting shock that emerges when the stereotype of the black "mammy" and the white child is reversed:

> Is there not something unseemly, in our society, about the spectacle of a white woman mothering a black child? A white woman giving totally to a black child; a black child totally and demandingly dependent for everything, sustenance itself, from a white woman. The image of a white woman suckling a black child; the image of a black child sucking for its life from the bosom of a white woman. The utter interdependence of such an image; the merging it implies; the giving up of a boundary; the encompassing of other within self; the unbounded generosity and interconnectedness of such an image. Such a picture says there is no difference; it places the hope of continuous generation, of immortality of the white self, in a little black face. (226-227)

In the absence of Snow's hovering whiteness—the precious "trick" of her beauty (139)—Boy and Bird live in that space of "unbounded generosity and interconnectedness": "Our daughter suckled so slowly, with the sucked-in cheeks of a wine-tasting expert. I'd nod over her while she fed, slipping in and out of sleep" (140). The interdependence, merging, and relinquishing of boundaries that Williams identifies in the act of a white woman mothering a black child is also evoked in the slippages and inversions that Oyeyemi privileges throughout her novel. For instance, when references to Emmitt Till's beating and murder circulate during a heated conversation at the Thanksgiving table, Boy reflects on her desire to keep the details from her ever-curious daughter a bit longer. In so

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doing, she makes explicit the ways that her mothering of a black child challenges not only the categories of black and white but also their deeply rooted ideological systems, the Us's and Them's that threaten the very heart of their relationship:

> I can make it harder for Bird's grief to begin. I doubt she'll believe that I share it; not at first, maybe not for a while... The three things I know: First, I'm with Bird in any Them versus Us situation she or anyone cares to name.
>
> Second, it's not whiteness itself that sets Them against Us, but the worship of whiteness...
>
> Third, we beat Them (and spare ourselves a lot of tedium and terror) by declining to worship (274-75).

Here, Boy's allegiance to the Us—a collective presumably defined by skin color—troubles not only the deeply entrenched binarism at the foundation of race in the United States but also the criteria through which such binarisms are structured. If, as Harryette Mullen so convincingly argues, "the literature of passing, particularly within the African-American tradition, has as its central concern the American mechanism for the cultural and genetic reproduction of whiteness" (1994:73), Boy's alignment with the Us born of Bird's black skin overwrites that concern and exposes what Mullen calls "a genetically illogical racial system requiring that racial identity be reduced essentially to a white/not-white binary" (73-74).

UNSETTLING TROPES

Embedded within *Boy, Snow, Bird* are several stories about beauty and power, life and death. Set in both African and American contexts, these stories invoke *black* and *white* as tropes in fantastic tales as well as material histories, contexts that challenge the boundaries between them, inviting them instead to mark each other, bleed into each other, transform each other. For instance, Bird's story of La Belle Capuchine—first shared with the spiders in her room in an effort to distract them from the fact that she

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knows so many Anansi stories and later recounted in a letter to Snow—turns on the many slippages between *black* and *white*. In Bird's tale, La Belle Capuchine is a beautiful house slave who perfectly mimics and resembles—except for her dark skin—the mistress of the house, Miss Margaux. Her complete identification with Miss Margaux, indeed their inseparability, causes the other house slaves to avoid her, especially since she often "addressed them as if she owned them" (224); the footman Michael, one of her spurned suitors, goes so far as to describe her as "the kind of traitor he'd never known before and hoped never to see again" (225). When High John the Conqueror finally arrives on the plantation to free the slaves, he mistakes Miss Margaux for La Belle Capuchine, claiming, "I think it's only fair to tell you that I see with more than just my eyes, and I cannot tell the difference between you" (227).[3] Miss Margaux—eager "to go adventuring with a Negro prince" (227)—refuses to correct him, leaving La Belle Capuchine to die alone on the plantation where her great beauty is ultimately worth nothing.

Bird's story is a complex and ironic passing narrative: consistent with the genre, it is the fair-skinned Miss Margaux who passes, but in this case she passes for the darker-skinned La Belle Capuchine. High John the Conqueror's ability to "see with more than just [his] eyes" highlights the fact that race is a performance, an orientation toward the world, a habitus, and La Belle Capuchine's flawless execution of whiteness literalizes the alienation so often described in passing narratives when Miss Margaux takes her place and the other slaves refuse to vouch for her identity. That Bird's story of La Belle Capuchine and Miss Margaux—daughters of the same father[4]—might be a parable of her relationship with Snow is made explicit when Snow writes that she "got paranoid reading it" and "kept wondering if La Belle Capuchine was a code version of [her]" (229). As with Boy's articulation of the "us" she shares with Bird, Bird's story of La Belle Capuchine, a tale of passing and beauty that goes both ways, blurs the lines between *us* and *them* and undermines their traditional definition through skin color.

After confessing her paranoia that La Belle Capuchine might be a code version of her, Snow shares her own version of La Belle

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Capuchine, a story she initially believes she learned from Clara but later realizes she created herself. In Snow's tale of La Belle Capuchine, the heroine tends a beautiful but deadly garden, in which every single flower is gorgeous but also poisonous, capable of killing by its scent alone; like her flowers, La Belle Capuchine is also beautiful and poisonous, and she continues to cultivate her garden until it takes over the entire world, killing everyone, at which point she takes a nap, and the cycle begins again. Snow contextualizes the story in relation to her being banished by Boy shortly after Bird's birth: "'It felt like I'd been discarded for another toy that was better, more lifelike (you). People sometimes said, "What a beautiful little girl," but I thought beautiful was bad'" (231).

The theme of beauty's dangerous and deadly powers also emerges in a tale that Boy and Mia collectively write earlier in the novel. In their story, a beautiful witch wants only to be left in peace to plant her cassava and feed her neighbors, but her husband fears her and hires a wizard to make her ugly. After countless failed attempts, the wizard accepts that the woman is a formidable witch, and he asks her to teach him, only to learn that she is little more than exterior clothing for the snake that is her heart. Although Boy and Mia craft this tale before Boy and Arturo have settled into a relationship, it nonetheless foreshadows Boy's figuration as the beautiful snake-witch: when she first sees the bracelet he has made for her, she thinks, "That snake was what he'd made for me, it was what he thought I wanted, was maybe even what he thought I was, deep down" (104). In addition, the snake's head, "bright as new chainmail" (57), is linked to Arturo's jeweled "chain mail, little scraps of knitted electrum with circles of blue crystal peeping through the links" (241). Ostensibly quite different tales, Bird's and Snow's tales of La Belle Capuchine, Mia and Boy's tale of the snake dressed as a beautiful witch, even Snow's account of her tale's origin, all reimagine the cultural—and often deadly—power of beauty, and their shared tropes and themes reverberate in ways that unsettle the familiarity of fixed categories. Read in the context of the novel's racial politics, they also reconstitute *black* and *white* through twisting and layered allegories that fold in on themselves, pushing *black* and *white*

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beyond simple tropes in the women's efforts to (re)negotiate the cultural values connected to the deadly dangers of beauty.

At the same time, *Boy, Snow, Bird* is peppered with family stories and cultural histories that anchor the central concerns of these fantastic tales in the everyday material realities of black life in midcentury America. In one letter, Snow describes their Great-aunt Effie's joy in sharing Whitman family stories "about pulling off confidence tricks and getting in with the right people and lording it over other colored folks and getting the last laugh" (213); only after a lot of persistent prodding does she recount a few of the more tragic cases: Addie Whitman, who was "too dark and 'ugly' to be allowed to marry" (213) and who drowned while trying to teach her black tomcat Minnaloushe to fear her since he refused to love her; Cass Whitman, "who hung herself to show her parents and her brothers exactly what she thought of their having run her 'unsuitable' fiancé out of town" (214); Vince Whitman, who, a day after proposing to a white woman, went for a walk with his new fiancée and shot them both dead because, according to Great-aunt Effie, he "was a realist" (214). Snow also passes along Great-aunt Effie's revenge fantasy, coded as an observation about how fortunate the Adairs were to employ a "colored cook" (215) with "a proper sense of right and wrong, conscience almost heavy enough to replace a slave collar" (215-16). Without this moral compass, Great-aunt Effie points out, such a cook—"ever smiling, ever respectful, ever ready to go the extra mile" (216)—might slowly fatten the family until they were too fat to run, at which point "this cook run astray might just take a brisk, ten-minute trip around the house, shooting every member of the family dead with the firearms they kept for their own protection" (216).

These anecdotes about the extended Whitman family are further punctuated by the racial politics of the current family around the Thanksgiving table. Clara's husband John describes making a game of "[following] middle-aged white ladies down deserted streets at night, walking faster as they walked faster, slowing down if a witness appeared" (272). While John "found their fear of him hilarious and sad" (272), his father-in-law, Gerald Whitman, is outraged by John's actions and upbraids him for not valuing his

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own life, reminding him of Emmett Till's brutal beating and murder for whistling at a white woman. Later in the meal, Bird notices a hair in her Aunt Vivian's cranberry sauce, which draws attention to the fact that Vivian's hair is falling out in clumps because it has been over-processed with lye, which is "too strong, or too regularly applied, something like that" (277). When Olivia remarks, "You always did overdo things, Vivian," Clara confronts Olivia and exposes the complicated tangle of hair, color, passing, and success at the heart of their family story: "You always did preach about hair. So tell us, what did Viv overdo? Was she supposed to pass as white, but only just? Was she supposed to come top of her class every time, but only just?" (277).

Through these embedded tales of fantasy and the Whitman family histories, through the characters' reflections on their own stories and the shared cultural narratives they inhabit and endure, fantasy and history converge, suggesting that race and its attendant regimes of beauty and sexuality exact a real and deadly price, one only hinted at in *Snow White*. Equally important, for Oyeyemi, however, are the tropes themselves—Snow White/Evil Queen; mother/daughter; fair/dark; black/white—and how such tropes move, how they are made to move, through cultural discourses of race and history, butting up against each other, slipping into each other. Through precisely this sort of deconstruction—a deconstruction that cannot easily be contained within the fairy tale's retelling as parable—Oyeyemi attends to the vagaries of whiteness and blackness in ways that draw the histories of slavery, segregation, racial categorization, blood, and passing into transnational circuits of meaning that span centuries and inform the lives of multiple generations of women in the novel.

INTERLOCKING FORMS

Beyond *Boy, Snow, Bird*'s thematic engagement with questions of race and history, Oyeyemi's formal challenges to the structure of the European fairy tale also foreground the ways that historical ideological formations contribute to an ongoing cultural politics of race through the fairy-tale genre itself. That is, Oyeyemi's deconstructed *Snow White* narrative relies on a folktale structure

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common to African expressive culture for the novel's overarching shape and, through this structure, invites a reconsideration of the ways that race has informed the very definition of the European fairy tale. In the introduction to his *African Folktales*, Roger Abrahams describes a fundamental distinction between Black African expressive culture and Western art forms: "Black African expressive culture... speaks constantly of the coordinating of many impulses to one overall effect. This effect, however, does not rely on the carefully realized harmonies, nor on the clear sense of beginning, middle, and end that we are used to expecting in most Western art forms. Rather, we have forms in Africa that highlight the steady thrust of life and art, an effect achieved through the interlocking of voices and the repetition, with variation, of the same basic patterns" (1983:6). Oyeyemi's arrangement and rearrangement of *Snow White*'s dominant tropes—the ways they are inhabited differently by the novel's cast of characters, the ways the characters move across and through the tropes—produces precisely this unsynthesized simultaneity of many different impulses. As Boy moves from Snow White to Evil Queen to heroic huntsman hoping to save Bird from the grief of racial violence, as Snow and Bird move through iterations of *fairest*, as *black* and *white* slip into and out of each other, *Boy, Snow, Bird* gives African expressive form to the European fairy tale through "the repetition, with variation, of the same basic patterns."[5]

Moreover, in keeping with the formal elements of the African folktale, the repetition of these basic patterns—*Boy, Snow, Bird*'s deconstructed tropes—is sutured throughout the novel by sets of interlocking voices: Boy's and Mia's, Bird's and Snow's, Boy's and Bird's. On the most basic level, the novel is structured by a tripartite multivocality, narrated first by Boy, then by Bird, and finally by Boy again. While such multivocal structuring is, of course, fairly common to contemporary western fiction, in *Boy, Snow, Bird*, Oyeyemi combines this multivocality with other forms of collaborative storytelling, and the effect resonates with the traditional methods of African expressive arts described by Abrahams. Indeed, the novel's privileged embedded tales—the story of the snake clothed in the beautiful witch's body and the

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stories of La Belle Capuchine—are created from the interlocking voices of pairs of characters. Even more, in these cases, the tales convey explicitly African or African American narrative themes, traditions, markers, and settings, foregrounding the African origins of the storytelling form that puts pressure on the European fairy-tale tradition and on *Snow White* in particular.

For instance, Boy and Mia's collaborative story about the beautiful witch and the snake at her heart is an act of improvisational storytelling that comes together in an integrated tale, much as Abrahams suggests African tales emerge out of participatory performance. Struggling to complete her feature article about the secret lives of blondes, Mia invites Boy to read what she has written so far; seeing that Mia is on the verge of abandoning her dream of becoming a journalist, Boy takes up the pen to add to Mia's piece, beginning a story about a wizard with the power to make women beautiful or, in rare cases, ugly. Reading over Boy's shoulder, Mia claims to "remember how this one goes" (53) and then writes the next section. They each write another section, implicitly challenging the other to admit that they are creating the story between them, not recounting a story they've read in the past:

> "Maybe that isn't the version you read," Mia said, watching me…
>
> "No, this is pretty much the version I read," I said, because it felt too damn late to back down (57).

This act of narrative co-creation emerges again in the stories that Bird and Snow share about La Belle Capuchine. While distinctly different stories and not produced in the same collaborative fashion as Boy and Mia's tale, the two La Belle Capuchine stories nonetheless illustrate the collective nature of African storytelling as they negotiate the cultural meaning of La Belle Capuchine through their varying perspectives. In addition, Bird's version is itself the product of interlocking voices: Leah's (the Whitmans' housekeeper who was fired for sharing it with her), Bird's, and those belonging to the people who shared the story in the past

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("[Leah] told me that each time a story like this one gets retold the new teller should add a little something of their own" [223]).

According to Abrahams, there are two key elements to African participatory storytelling: first, "the seizure of the role of narrator and the maintaining of it in the face of ongoing critical commentary" and, second, "the constant interaction between storyteller and audience" (14).[6] These elements are enacted and reimagined in the novel's scenes of collaborative storytelling as well as in the structure of *Boy, Snow, Bird* itself. The novel's multivocal story—controlled at different times by Boy, Bird, and Snow—illustrates beautifully the ongoing contest for narrative authority. Within this context, Boy's privileged position as the first narrator allows her to challenge Snow's fetishization by the Whitmans, Agnes Miller (her maternal grandmother), and the town of Flax Hill:

> "Snow is not as wonderful as everybody thinks she is," I said to Mia…
>
> "What did she do?"
>
> "Nothing yet. But I'm wise to her" (140).

Though her own perspective may be somewhat dubious and the other characters might strongly disagree with her (even Mia suggests she needs more rest when she hears Boy's suspicions), Boy's narrative authority allows her to dominate Snow's representation until Bird takes over in the second part of the novel. Although Boy and Bird never literally struggle over the role of narrator, the fact that Bird assumes the narrator's role suggests the possibility of such a contest, especially when she reconsiders and re-narrates Boy's opinion of Snow: "I asked her what Snow was like. 'She's okay if you like that sort of thing,' Mom said… I guess it's a thing you say when you're jealous and don't have the guts to come right out and be sincerely nasty… I gave Mom a chance to say whatever she wanted to say about Snow, and that was all she wanted to say. So once she and Dad had left for their dinner date I took the letters [from Snow] and I read them. Afterward I felt less sure that Mom wasn't the enemy" (186). Here, the negotiation for narrative

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authority extends beyond Boy and Bird to include Snow as well: her letters allow for her own participation in a triangulated contest to define her identity and the role she plays in the unfolding story of the three women's lives.

The possibility of competition for narrative control, particularly between Bird and Boy, is further implied by Bird's association with the trickster. While Bird's familiarity with Anansi stories and her ongoing friendships with the spiders in her room certainly connect her to the trickster, she also takes on trickster characteristics herself, including an ability to perfectly imitate the voices of others, a talent she deploys for mischief and information gathering. And, like the trickster, Bird brings chaos to the community—although not for the reasons the traditional trickster does. That is, it is neither Bird's greed nor her inability to abide by the dominant social norms that here cause social chaos; rather, it is simply by virtue of her very existence, of her being born a dark-skinned African American child in a family that has chosen to pass for white and in a community that has accepted—indeed depended on—that passing. In this sense, Bird typifies the African American trickster, who is rarely disciplined for his misdeeds and social transgressions, in contrast to the African trickster who is almost always punished for them (de Souza 2003; Dundes 1971).[7] Bird's association with the trickster further reiterates the African storytelling tradition in which the trickster figure vies for, and frequently assumes, the role of storyteller within the tale itself, a point Abrahams makes in his discussion of the frequent meta-narrative incorporation of the storyteller or trickster as characters in African tales: "Having storytellers or some other kind of aggressive trickster as a central figure illustrates the motive of competition that informs many of the other [African] tales, too" (1983:15-16).

Beyond the novel's tripartite narrative structure, *Boy, Snow, Bird* also opens up into several first-person stories, relatively fleeting moments of narrative authority wrested from the primary narrator, and these acts of narrative agency also imply a struggle over control of the story and its representations. Thus, for example, Olivia Whitman disrupts Boy's first narrative section with her own story of growing up in the

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south, being berated by a white woman, performing the slow and stupid African American woman in response, inadvertently passing on a road trip, and finally choosing to pass for good in Flax Hill. Olivia's act of narrative agency poses a direct challenge to Boy's representation of her as a cold-hearted woman unwilling to recognize (much less love) Bird, whom she sees as a threat to her "white" existence; briefly occupying the role of narrator, Olivia interrupts Boy's story, breaking into the dominant narrative, and appeals directly to the audience—not only Boy, but also the reader—for sympathy. In so doing, she also lays bare the double-standard in which passing, for white Europeans like Boy (whose grandparents emigrated from Hungary and who feels at home in Flax Hill because the air tastes like *pálinka*), is considered "successful assimilation" while, for African Americans, it is seen as "willful deception or duplicity" (Mullen 1994:77).

At the same time, this implicit competition for narrative authority—the formal play of voices that structures *Boy, Snow, Bird*—also encourages "the constant interaction between storyteller and audience" so common in African participatory storytelling. In modeling storytelling as negotiation—the characters' continual reconsideration and re-narration of each other's stories and claims—Oyeyemi invites the reader to play a similarly active role in shaping the story. That is, the reader's knowledge of Oyeyemi's intertexts—European fairy tales, African and African American folklore and folktales, nineteenth-century American novels, histories of American slavery and institutionalized segregation, collective memories of racist and religious persecution and acts of violence, cultural discourses of beauty in relation to skin color—all bear on the novel's meaning and, thus, affect the reader's interpretation of the story as much as, if not more than, the characters' understandings of and responses to these same intertexts.

Finally, in addition to incorporating formal aspects of the African folktale and its storytelling conventions through deconstructed tropes and shifting narrators, *Boy, Snow, Bird* also resists what Abrahams refers to as "the clear sense of beginning, middle, and end" characteristic of Western narrative art forms, opting

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instead for a final open-endedness that aligns with another common feature of African expressive arts. Along these lines, Abrahams contends that "achieving a sense of closure, of strong and definitive conclusion, is a condition regarded as neither possible nor desirable.... The idea of having a strong sense of resolution then, to which Westerners are so accustomed, seems strange to an African, an anathema" (Abrahams 1983:15). At the close of *Boy, Snow, Bird*, everything is in flux as Boy, Snow, Bird, and Mia head off to New York with the hopes of disenchanting the Ratcatcher. Even Bird's "noisy kiss" (308) on Olivia's cheek and Olivia's stepping aside to let them pass are unprecedented actions in the family's story to date. What happens next is anyone's guess; the only certainty is that the story's ending is full of infinite possibility.

MIRROR, MIRRORED

The critical and cultural power of *Boy, Snow, Bird*'s unsettling tropes and interlocking forms is especially evident in the novel's figuration of the mirror, the central trope and driving force in the most widely known versions of *Snow White*. Indeed, as Cristina Bacchilega points out, "critics have focused on the magic mirror so insistently that it has become a metaphor for *Snow White* itself" (1997:31). Such critical attention focuses in particular on the mirror's voice, which has been interpreted as ventriloquizing the daughter, the mother, the father, patriarchal society, and even the "truth" as rooted in self-reflection (33).[8] Regardless of whose voice might be articulated through the mirror's verses, Bacchilega argues that the mirror's frame is concealed by the deeply ideological fairy-tale voice, that of the "external or impersonal narrator whose straightforward statements carry no explicit mark of human perspective—gender, class, or individuality" (34), which in turn "naturalizes the plenitude of the feminine image in the mirror" (34). If the mirror's privileged status and its hegemonic cultural work are sustained by *Snow White*'s impersonal narrator, they are completely shattered by the different narrators and their situated first-person descriptions and engagements with the mirror in *Boy, Snow, Bird.*

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For Boy, Snow, and Bird, the mirror is neither a naturalized repository of femininity nor a site of Lacanian subjectivization and self-elaboration; it is not a voice, not an expectation, not a measure. Rather than reflect or constrain Boy, Snow, or Bird, the mirrors at the heart of the novel open portals to unpredictable sites of enchantment and possibility, a point Snow considers when she writes to Bird, "I think mirrors behave differently depending on how you treat them. Treating them like clocks (as almost everybody seems to) makes them behave like clocks, but treating them as doors—does any of this make sense to you?" (Oyeyemi 2014:207). While Snow's thought goes unfinished, it is clear that she grants the mirror an agency absent in *Snow White*—despite that mirror's ability to speak—and this agency allows Oyeyemi's mirror to emerge as a central character in the novel.[9] Cast with an "inscrutable personality (possibly impish and/or amoral), presenting convincing and yet conflicting images of the same object, thereby leading onlookers astray" (153), the novel's mirror—even more than Bird—is the real trickster.

The trickster and the mirror have deep affiliations. Among the trickster's many characteristics and proclivities, Barbara Babcock-Abrahams identifies two that underscore this association: tricksters "[o]ften have a two-fold physical nature and/or a 'double' and are associated with mirrors," and they "tend to express a concomitant breakdown of the distinction between reality and reflection" (1975:159-160). In *Boy, Snow, Bird*, Oyeyemi literalizes the metaphorical underpinnings of the trickster's relationship to the mirror such that the novel's trickster-mirror continually blurs the boundaries between "reality and reflection." The novel itself opens with Boy's retrospective observation about the untrustworthy nature of mirrors, an untrustworthiness born of their inability to distinguish reality and reflection: "Nobody ever warned me about mirrors, so for many years I was fond of them, and believed them to be trustworthy" (3). Later, when "wantonly" kissing her image in the glass, Boy's material self bleeds into her reflected self, and she is left with "a taste of blood where my mouth met my mouth, as if our lips were blades" (40). Like Boy, Bird and Snow also experience the trickster-mirror's play with reality and reflection when they fail to

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appear in mirrors or when their mirrored image reveals a different pair of girls: "Snow's hand was on my shoulder and both my own hands were at my sides, but our reflections didn't call that any kind of reunion. The girls in the mirror had their arms around each other, and they smiled at us until we followed their lead" (265). Here, the mirror even goes so far as to *create* a different reality through reflection. So powerful is the trickster-mirror's magic, its confusion of reality and reflection, that it even initiates the Ratcatcher's transformation from Frances to Frank: "'He says he looked in the mirror one morning when he was still Frances, and this man she'd never seen before was just standing there, looking back… Once she'd established that he was there to stay, she named him Frank,'" cut her hair, and began living as a man (295).

In a deconstructed Snow White story told through a novel about beauty and power, race and passing, skin color and hair texture, the trickster-mirror's unreliability, its play with reality and reflection, obviously comments on the spurious nature of beauty standards—whether our own, the girl's, the mother's, the father's, or society's—and the ideologies of gender, race, and sexuality tangled up in them. It clearly calls into question the Ideal-I—the perfect, but imaginary, self formed through the mirror—as the basis for subjectivity. And, it flat out rejects the cultural expectations that set female rivalry in motion. But, *Boy, Snow, Bird*'s trickster-mirror also does much more. As a portal to a radically different space of enchantment, it suggests alternatives to the feminine modes of sociality locking Snow White and the Evil Queen in an eternal battle predicated on female jealousy. By inverting and refracting *Snow White*'s naturalized ideological impulses, the trickster-mirror makes visible the blind spots in the *Snow White* tradition, turning the mirror as "clock" into a mechanism for female allegiance and play, for unconventional desires and transformed selves.

CONCLUSION

As a multivocal novel centered on a black baby's exposure of a family passing for white, *Boy, Snow, Bird* is continually interrupted and disrupted by an African and African American

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presence that haunts both Oyeyemi's *Snow White* tale and its European counterpart. Drawing on interruption as a narrative mode, Oyeyemi writes a series of inversions, strange mirrorings that expose the intricate and infinitely complex workings of race and power in and through the cultural imaginary. Thus, for example, the social disruption we might expect at the end of an African tale—and particularly a trickster tale—becomes social solidarity as the women head off in an effort to disenchant the Ratcatcher; as a mirrored reflection of the European fairy tale's happily-ever-after, however, this inversion also suggests that the social solidarity and cohesion characteristic of the European tale's conclusion—the dwarves gifting Snow White to the Prince; their eventual wedding—might be little more than a screen for the violence necessary to bring about the apparently happy ending. That is, the Stepmother's death from her forced dancing in burning hot iron shoes is an act justified by the misogynistic logic that only understands her relationship with Snow White through female rivalry. Through these eruptions, disruptions, and interruptions to the European *Snow White* tradition, Oyeyemi provides yet another way in which transnational circuits of race, misogyny, and history move in and through the fairy tale.

As the African folktale settles into the heart of *Boy, Snow, Bird*, it also unsettles the European fairy tale's largely unrecognized hegemony.[10] Entwined like the "black" and "white" sisters reflected in the trickster-mirror's image of Bird and Snow's reunion, the African folktale and the European fairy tale reflect and refract their complex histories as well as the categorical distinctions that hold them apart. In so doing, they necessarily raise questions about their broader genre designations: why, for instance, is the European story a fairy tale while the African story a folktale? And, how and why do such classifications consign different types of tales to hierarchies of scholarly and commercial value? Why is one ostensibly local and the other seemingly universal? Such questions of genre and genealogy, of origin and value, echo the questions *Boy, Snow, Bird* considers in its portrayal of Bird and Snow, underscoring the arbitrary—but nonetheless highly political—systems of race, gender, beauty, and power in which they find themselves.

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Thus, in reimagining the formulaic European fairy tale—both *Snow White* and the genre itself—through specific and particular historical phenomena as well as through peculiar and disquieting new elements, *Boy, Snow, Bird* contests its assumed universality, exposing instead the fairy tale's frequent decontextualization, the ways in which it is unmoored from the historical and cultural networks of its textual production and ongoing circulation. Oyeyemi's interest in interrogating the European fairy tale as a genre beyond the *Snow White* tradition is evident in her invocation of *Sleeping Beauty*, *Cinderella*, and *Red Riding Hood* as fragmented touchpoints throughout the novel.[11] Indeed, the critical adaptation of European fairy tales as well as other western myths and canonical literature has been one of Oyeyemi's enduring projects. Prior to *Boy, Snow, Bird*, Oyeymi's *Mr. Fox* (2011) intersperses complex reworkings of *Bluebeard*, *Mr. Fox*, and *Fitcher's Bird*—along with other fairy tales such as Madame D'Aulnoy's *The White Cat*—with her own fantastic tales set in Africa or involving African characters. The effect is a similar exposure of the ostensible universality of "the fairy tale."[12] In extending this project of critical adaptation to *Boy, Snow, Bird*, Oyeyemi not only critiques the gendered and raced assumptions at the heart of the *Snow White* tradition but also challenges the cultural hegemony of the European fairy tale and its invisibilized racial underpinnings.

This paper was inspired by my many conversations with Roger over the past two years—and, of course, by Roger's foundational early work on the African folktale. During our visits, Roger and I spend time reminiscing about the people we know and discussing the different books we've been reading—from detective fiction to literary novels to history, literary criticism, and fairy tale studies. Our readings most frequently converge around the themes of race, colonial history, postcolonial studies, folklore, and fairy tales. On my favorite days, we slip into our old professor-student relationship and I get my own private tutorial with Roger, including a long list of things to read. Thus, it is no exaggeration when I say that my reading here would not have been possible without our recent engagements.

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I would like to thank Cristina Bacchilega, Kathy Chetkovich, and Lewis Seifert for their thoughtful readings and typically productive questions and insights, all of which have enriched my thinking for this article.

NOTES

1. Soon after Bird's birth, Boy comes to interpret Snow's loving attention to Bird as disingenuous and, to her mind, perhaps malicious, though she herself also questions her own judgment about this. The fact that her opinion is not shared by any of the other characters—even her closest friend, Mia, who has no investment in Snow's whiteness—reiterates the potentially fantastic nature of Boy's interpretation. Later, when Bird and Boy are discussing Snow's upcoming Thanksgiving visit, Boy says, "I'll be watching her every move. Kidding, kidding..." (240; ellipsis in original). Narrating this part of the story, Bird claims, "She wasn't kidding. I asked her what Snow had ever done to her, and she said it was a good question" (240).
2. *Boy, Snow, Bird* ends with Boy's desire to "break [the] spell" (299) that has transformed her mother into the Ratcatcher. While Oyeyemi's emphasis on Boy's desire to disenchant the Ratcatcher might make sense in a novel about mothers and daughters, it nonetheless discounts the Ratcatcher's chosen identity as a man by assuming the possibility of a suppressed interior female identity. It seems worth noting that the novel's final turn to female solidarity and collaboration depends on a dismissal of the Ratcatcher's male identity as an authentic and self-determined one.
3. High John the Conqueror is a trickster folk hero in the African American tradition. See Zora Neale Hurston's *The Sanctified Church: The Folklore Writings of Zora Neale Hurston* (1981) and Nathaniel Mackey's "Other: From Noun to Verb" (1992) for more details and discussion of High John the Conqueror in African American folklore. La Belle Capuchine is one of Oyeyemi's creations; she says in an online interview with Molly McArdle (2014) for *The Believer*, "I brought High John into Bird's La Belle Capuchine story, written in a letter to her sister, as a nod to Zora, but I do want to note that the rest of the La Belle Capuchine narrative is made up because sometimes readers can be reluctant when it comes to accepting that something's been

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fairly recently fabricated; especially if the something is told in a folkloric register and has black people in it." Also noteworthy, perhaps, in the context of my discussion here, is High John the Conquerer's use of "fair"—here meaning "just" or "honest"—in relation to the conflation of black (La Belle Capuchine) and white (Miss Margaux) as they pertain to beauty, slavery, and freedom.

4. Here, too, Bird's personal life story is an inversion: historically, it was not uncommon for white slave owners to father children with their legal wives as well as with slave women (often, but not always, through rape), a practice at the center of Bird's story of La Belle Capuchine and Miss Margaux. In her own case, Arturo—a black man passing as white—fathers two daughters, the fair-skinned Snow born to a black woman passing as white and the dark-skinned Bird born to a white woman who doesn't realize her husband is black.

5. As a category, "African" poses the troubling problem of subsuming the enormous cultural, linguistic, and geographic variability of the Black African subcontinent into a single identifying term. Nonetheless, I have chosen to use "African" for two reasons, one rooted in Abrahams' work, the other in Oyeyemi's. Abrahams opens his preface to *African Folktales* by acknowledging the seeming futility of creating a "representative selection" from such profound diversity: "In the face of such diversity and the immense geographical areas covered, how could one possibly hope to make any meaningful cultural statement through the putting together of a representative anthology? Fortunately, the question has been answered again and again for us, by Black Africans themselves, and by European and American observers: In spite of the range of culture-types, there are widely observable continuities, especially in the area of aesthetics, to be found in groups throughout the continent" (Abrahams 1983:xiii). I am thus following Abrahams' lead in drawing on the "observable continuities" in African storytelling forms for my reading of *Boy, Snow, Bird.*

   Similarly, what I am referring to as Oyeyemi's "African"-related storytelling forms and tales—the more familiar Anansi stories as well as her invented tales—draw on common themes, settings, objects, and other non-culturally specific references that invoke an Africa of the imagination more than a real, material African culture or location. In a personal essay for *The Guardian* titled "Home, Strange Home" (2005), Oyeyemi uses the oc-

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casion of London's 2005 "cultural celebration of the continent" to meditate on her relationship to Africa, calling attention to the ways her experiences as a first- and second-generation Nigerian immigrant are shaped by global and postcolonial discourses, continental identifications and national belongings, museum exhibits and international aid campaigns, as well as family expectations and peer interactions. "As a Nigerian brought up in Britain," she writes, "I admit that when it comes to Africa, I just don't get it." But, of course, she gets it: the remainder of the essay both resists the tendency to privilege an idea of Africa as a continent more than a "collection of nations splitting up a vast and ancient landscape" while also, perhaps paradoxically, calling for a "[recognition] that the continent belongs to us all [Africans of all nations and regions]." For Oyeyemi, an important part of this recognition entails an acknowledgement that "there are voices rising out of our continent, a resourcefulness and energy to which it is good to lay a shared claim, even if these voices tell no more than myths."

I offer this extended discussion from Abrahams and Oyeyemi to contextualize my use of "African" as a category that, I hope, coheres with their own sense of Africa as simultaneously one and many.

6. While such interactions between storyteller and audience obviously exist in most oral storytelling contexts outside of Africa, Abrahams suggests that competition to maintain narrative control as well as the ongoing interaction between storyteller and audience are particularly vigorous and central components of African storytelling and consistent with African aesthetic forms more generally. Drawing out the similarities between African storytelling and musical performances, Abrahams writes: "In the contest, even the potential conflict of voices, we can feel the vibrancy of the African creative impulse most fully. Through the powerful coordination of these effects in the face of possible chaos, the African artist achieves his or her sense of mastery; and the manifestations of this achievement across the spectrum of culture expression are extraordinary" (7).

7. In summarizing the literature on such distinctions, De Souza writes, "Dundes, Roberts and Colardelle... show that the African trickster is often punished for his deeds whereas in the Afro-American tales he rarely is. Colardelle even concludes that Anancy tales in Africa are mostly used to convey a moral message....

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Afro-American tales, on the other hand, most often foreground a spider which escapes punishment" (De Souza 2003:344). De Souza persuasively attributes such distinctions to the reality of living under a system of plantation slavery: "Slaves needed a folk hero whom they could praise for his ability to defy more powerful forces, rather than a figure punished for defying the given order. Anancy's perennial rebellion against social norms and his use of comic trickery made him an attractive figure of resistance for this downtrodden people" (345).

8. Bacchilega (1997:33) summarizes the critical literature concerning whose voice is represented through the mirror's verses as part of her argument about the naturalization of ideology that occurs when critics overlook the significance of the mirror's framing: Bruno Bettelheim argues that it is the daughter's voice, the girl's projection of jealousy onto the mother; Shuli Barzilai understands it as the mother's voice as she mourns the growing separation from her maturing daughter; Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar claim that it is the voice of patriarchal definitions and demands for women; N.J. Giradot contends that it is the "truth" as determined through self-reflection; and Steven Swann Jones suggests that it is both Snow White's and society's.

9. Oyeymi has a long tradition of playing with the trope of the mirror, and her novel *Icarus Girl* (2005) revolves around the mirror and twinning (literally). See Laura Fish's "Woman in the Mirror: Reflections" (2015) for a general overview of Oyeyemi's use of the mirror in the context of British black women's fiction more broadly.

10. For an extended consideration of how contemporary fairy-tale adaptations, as part of an "intertextual and geopolitical fairy-tale web" (ix), might contribute to a "provincializing" of the Euro-American literary fairy tale, see Cristina Bacchilega's *Fairy Tales Transformed* (2013). Bacchilega's nuanced readings of intermedial fairy-tale adaptations highlight the importance of continued efforts to decolonize fairy-tale studies by reading them alongside a range of geopolitical formations.

11. *Sleeping Beauty*: "One of the bigger houses had brambles growing up the front of it like snakelike vines" (Oyeyemi 2014:25); *Cinderella*: "I also went up half a shoe size, which pleased me because it was another bridge burned between me and the rat catcher. Come into town, rat catcher, come looking for your daughter, come holding a pair of the shoes she left. Say to everyone who'll

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listen: 'If the shoe fits, she's mine.' Gather witnesses... the more the merrier. They'd see me wedge my feet into the narrow shoes, see how far my heels spill over the back of them. Then they'll hear me tell him: 'I'm so sorry. Keep searching. Good luck'" (127-128); *Little Red Riding Hood*: "The display case [of a music box] was a wolf, stood on all four paws, and made of cloudy gray glass... He had a hole right in the middle of him... filled by a little tin doll, painted peach, smiling and wearing a red felt cape...I'd look at the wolf and at Red Riding Hood with her knees up, not even playing dead, openly living there, and I'd try to think who could've made them and what that person meant by it" (173-174).

12. While Oyeyemi's unsettling of the European fairy tale (among other European genres) through African characters, themes, contexts, and forms recurs throughout her oeuvre, the racial politics of twentieth-century America and twentieth- and twenty-first-century Britain obviously vary considerably and, thus, provide very different contexts for the consideration of genre and geopolitics in *Boy, Snow, Bird* and *Mr. Fox*. Here, then, I am simply trying to highlight one of Oyeyemi's preoccupations with European genre without collapsing the nuanced and specific ways she interrogates and recasts the fairy tale, in particular, in these two novels.

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